

Working in Hartley Bay

A Work History of the Gitga'at

Draft Version for Community Feedback by

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Preface And Acknowledgements:

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Figure 1: Aerial of Hartley Bay, 1982 (Courtesy BC Archives, I-11796)

Nestled in a sheltered cove between the snow-capped peaks of the Coast Mountain Range and the hostile waters of the Pacific Ocean, Hartley Bay exists in a world mysterious to most urban British Columbians. It is separated from Prince Rupert, the closest city, by a four hour ferry ride or one hour flight by floatplane and is inaccessible by road. The only vehicles found in the village are golf carts and ATVs brought in by ferry alongside groceries and other supplies purchased in Prince Rupert. Transportation is done mostly by foot along the village's extensive boardwalk built above the area's marshy ground. A siren still sounds to mark nightly curfew and if kids are seen wandering the boardwalk after curfew, it is certain the witness will know not only their names but also the names of friends, family members, and ancestors. With only 200 residents, "stranger" is a term rarely heard in Hartley Bay.



Figure 2: Hartley Bay, 1910 (Courtesy BCA, I-56051)

Geographically, Hartley Bay is among the most remote and isolated settlements in British Columbia today but in economic and social terms, it shares striking similarities with other resource-based communities situated along the coast. For 120 years, the people of Hartley Bay, almost exclusively Aboriginal, have depended on the resources provided by the natural environment to ensure their survival and prosperity. During times of economic growth, marine resources, animal hides, and forestry products generated considerable wealth for everyone involved in their harvest and when profits fell, these abundant resources, particularly fish, seaweeds, and other marine life, ensured that no one in Hartley Bay was without life's basic necessities. Despite its remoteness and harsh surroundings, Hartley Bay was an economically vibrant community for much of the twentieth century. The purpose of this paper is to examine the economic history of Hartley Bay by studying the employment history of its residents. The study begins with a brief introduction to the establishment of Hartley Bay and the historical contexts within which it grew. The body of the text is divided into five sections: 1) Fishing and Cannery Labour; 2) Trapping and Hunting; 3) Forest Industry; 4) Agriculture; and 5) Other Occupations. Fishing and Cannery Labour is presented first because it has been more significant than the others and provides a context within which the other areas of economic activity can be examined.

Introduction

Located at the mouth of Douglas Channel on British Columbia's northwest coast, Hartley Bay is home to the Gitga'at, members of the Tsimshian First Nation, whose name means "the people of the cane."¹ Although the Gitga'at have lived in the area for centuries, Hartley Bay has only been a permanent settlement since the late 1880s. Old Town, or Laxgal'tsap, located 12 miles north of Hartley Bay where the Douglas Channel meets the Quaal River, was the traditional home of the Gitga'at. In the late 1860s a majority of its residents moved to Metlakatla and since then Old Town has been used and occupied only seasonally. Metlakatla, situated just west of Prince Rupert and north of the Skeena River, was the famous religious community established by zealous Church Missionary Society preacher William Duncan. He believed he could civilize the Tsimshian by teaching them Christianity while, in the process, disregarding completely their own ancient civilization. Despite their proximity to the Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Simpson, the Gitga'at had remained relatively isolated from white settlement. For many, the move to Metlakatla was their first prolonged exposure to a strange form of religion, a foreign "morality," and a new economic system, all of which challenged traditional Gitga'at practices and beliefs.

In 1887, after two decades at Metlakatla, 27 Gitga'at people returned to their traditional territory and started a village at one of their fall seasonal camp sites.² This village was Hartley Bay. In addition to establishing a new home, the Gitga'at also developed a new lifestyle that mixed traditional values and customs with new ones learned at Metlakatla. One of the most significant changes resulting from this mixing

¹ Ken Campbell, "Hartley Bay, British Columbia: A History," in Margaret Seguin, ed., *The Tsimshian: Images of the Past; Views for the Present* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1984), 4.

² People of the Cane. *The Story of Hartley Bay* (Prince Rupert: School District 53, 1987) 11.



Figure 3: Old Town, 1913 (Courtesy BCA, E-02960)



Figure 4: Chief Heber Clifton with a Carved Stone from Old Town (Courtesy BCA, F-05343)

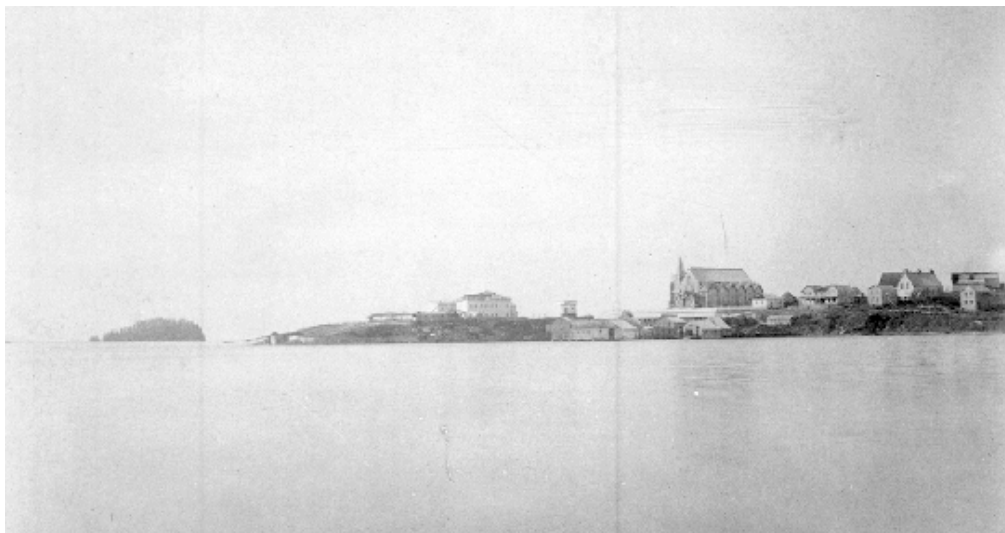


Figure 5: Metlakatla in the 1870s (Courtesy BCA, A-04165)



Figure 6: William Duncan with residents of Metlakatla ca. 1910 (Courtesy BCA, A-04165)

was a new economic system. In addition to gathering traditional foods, including fish, seaweed, berries, and other important plants and animals, the Gitga'at also took part in European economic activities that paid Indians by the hour. At Metlakatla, jobs were found in construction, as labourers at the local sawmill and later the cannery, and as town leaders working alongside Duncan to maintain religious and civil order. Over time, working for a wage become a lucrative resource for Aboriginal Peoples, many of whom spent more time working for a wage and less time gathering food for home consumption.



Figure 7: Hartley Bay, 1913 (Courtesy BCA, F-03018)

At the same time that their traditional economy was changing, other aspects of life at Hartley Bay were being transformed. In 1889, Peter O'Reilly surveyed Gitga'at territory and established four reserves totalling approximately 700 acres.³ Like paid work, the reserve system challenged key aspects of Gitga'at traditional life. Before Europeans arrived in British Columbia, all the lands around Douglas Channel were controlled and managed by the Gitga'at. After the reserve system came into effect, the

³ Department of Indian Affairs [hereafter DIA], *Annual Report, 1900*, Part II, 111.

Gitga'at were assigned specific areas that were of little value to Europeans. Three years later in 1892, traditional customs and beliefs were again challenged, this time by the establishment of the first school in Hartley Bay. This school was designed to teach Aboriginal children how to live and work in the European world but, like Duncan's



Figure 8: Dedication of the new church, February 7, 1938 (Courtesy United Church Archives)

missionary society, it failed to appreciate the complexity of traditional Gitga'at civilizations. In 1903, the original school was replaced by a new facility built by the Methodist Church which continued to provide Gitga'at children with a European-style "education" for much of the first half of the twentieth century.⁴ In addition to teaching mainstream Canadian values, the education system, like the reserve system, pushed Aboriginal People to become more dependent on paid work

and other aspects of European

economies. This coincided with the construction of the first steamer wharf at Hartley Bay in 1900 and the subsequent expansion of the European population in that area.

Despite all these changes, the Gitga'at did not abandon their traditional lifestyle. By the turn of the twentieth century, most First Nations, including the Gitga'at, were working as seasonal workers but they did not become dependent on paid work. Instead,

⁴ DIA, *Annual Report*, 1892, 296; DIA, *Annual Report*, 1904, Part II, 42.

they continued to gather food just as their ancestors had done for centuries. This ensured that they would have enough food when jobs were scarce. From their earlier home at Old Town, the Gitga'at had traveled to adjacent islands to harvest the abundant natural resources spread along the northwest coast. Some of the most important resource sites were the salmon fishery on Quaal River, the seaweed camp at Kiel on Princess Royal Island, and the various halibut fishing banks. In addition to these marine resources, the Gitga'at also trapped game, harvested timber, and practiced limited agriculture for home consumption and trade with other First Nations. After relocating to Hartley Bay, the Gitga'at continued to harvest these natural resources and still do today.

Figure 8: Hartley Bay schoolroom, 1951 (Courtesy BCA B-04388)

Over time, the federal and provincial governments passed laws to restrict Aboriginal Peoples' access to traditional foods. This forced them to become more dependent on paid work. Initially, restrictions on these resources did not have a great effect on the Gitga'at. Fishing and cannery work provided them with enough money to

buy what they could not get from the natural environment and when work was scarce, important resources, like fish and seaweed, satisfied their basic needs. After World War II, this started to change. Soldiers returning from overseas, technological improvements, and racist labour laws cut off Indians from the job market. At the same time, changes made to fishing, logging, and hunting and trapping laws made it almost impossible for Aboriginal Peoples to make up for the lost income. For the first time in thousands of years, many British Columbia First Nations could no longer support themselves without government aid. However, the Gitga'at, along with some other coastal First Nations, continued to thrive during these hard times. Two factors are responsible for this. First, their skill in the fishing industry provided them with jobs through the 1970s and second, the remoteness of Hartley Bay meant that their access to traditional foods was not much affected by new laws. It was not until the late 1970s and 1980s, after the collapse of the commercial fishing industry and the beginnings of social welfare, that the Gitga'at economy went into decline.

Although the Gitga'at and the Tsimshian First Nation has been the focus of a number of important books and articles, the history of work in Hartley Bay is often overlooked. For example, Margaret Seguin's *The Tsimshian: Images of the Past; Views for the Present* is an important book but it does not focus on the history of work. References she and other authors make to traditional food gathering practices or wage work are noted and included in this paper. This information is combined with records from the Department of Indian Affairs, including annual reports and Indian Agent correspondence. However, the most important sources used in writing this paper are the people of Hartley Bay. Much of the history recorded here is taken from interviews with

local residents in both Hartley Bay and Prince Rupert. Combined with written documents, these interviews provide a fuller history of work in Hartley Bay from the late nineteenth century to the present.



Figure 9: Heber and Lucy Clifton outside the church (Courtesy United Church Archives)

Fishing and Cannery Labour

For the people of Hartley Bay, fishing has been the most significant economic activity, both before Europeans arrived and after. The ocean, which can be seen from the doorway of every house in Hartley Bay, is home to abundant marine life, including several species of salmon, halibut, herring, clams, urchins, sea cucumbers, and seaweeds, that form an important part of the local diet. In addition to providing the Gitga'at with food, harvesting these precious natural resources has been, and continues to be, crucial to their economic, cultural, and political lives. In the last 150 years, traditional methods

have changed dramatically to keep pace with the changes faced by Aboriginal People across the province but the importance of fish has remained.

Before Europeans arrived in British Columbia, the Gitga'at fished both for home consumption and for trade with nearby Aboriginal groups. Gitga'at elder Helen Clifton remembers that her people traditionally traded "with our Gixts'an relatives up there, we would get the soapberries, and we'd get Saskatoon berries, trading for our seafoods."⁵ Margaret Reece, interviewed at age 85, remembers that when she was a girl, her relatives regularly traded seaweed to the Kitamaat for oolichan grease.⁶ They used techniques that had been developed over thousands of years which fused fishing methods with spiritual beliefs and practices. When Europeans first arrived, little changed. Despite the emergence of new non-Aboriginal trading partners, particularly the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) which built trading posts at Port Simpson and Bella Bella, traditional techniques remained largely the same. Even when the vast majority of the residents of Old Town relocated to Metlakatla, they "still travelled to their traditional fishing and food gathering camps up to eighty miles away."⁷

Slowly, traditional methods began to change to be more compatible with new technologies and European ways of working. The most important change was the emergence of the fish canning industry. In 1876, a cannery was established on Skeena River, just south of Metlakatla, and in 1881 another cannery opened at Rivers Inlet. At the same time, the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) reported that "Indians in the vicinity of Metlakahtla ... have begun to salt and export fish, and are anxious to establish

⁵ Helen Clifton, interviewed by John Lutz, June 2004.

⁶ Margaret "Goulie" Reece, interviewed by John Lutz and Liam Haggarty, 16 February 2005; and Merle Reece, interviewed by John Lutz, June 2004.

⁷ Campbell, "Hartley Bay, British Columbia," 9.

a cannery.”⁸ As early as 1882, British Columbia canneries employed 1,400 fishermen, most of whom were Aboriginal.⁹ According to the DIA, “Tsimpsheean Indians, and particularly those of his village [Metlakatla], are preferred by the fisheries.”¹⁰ As Chief Pat Sterritt noted, “The Gitga’at people were really hard workers; they were in demand all over the coast because they were known to work really hard and to be reliable.”

And their hard work was rewarded. The wages paid at canneries along the coast were high for men, women, and their children. Historian John Lutz estimates that in three months a single family could earn what a skilled tradesman in Victoria made in a year. DIA records support this statement. By the end of the 1880s, virtually every Annual Report published by the DIA described how commercial fishing was “The principal industry upon which the Indians here [in the Northwest Coast Agency] depend ... and it is one at which men, women and even children find very remunerative employment.”¹¹ Revenue from the fishing industry peaked in 1888-89 when Indians in the North-West Agency, in which Hartley Bay was located, received \$180,000 for their contributions to the commercial fishing industry.¹² In today’s dollars, that amounts to more than three million dollars. Charles Todd, the local Indian Agent, stated that “The Indians of the Tsimpsean Nation earn more money in proportion to their numbers than any other Indians, and have acquired more expensive habits than any of the other tribes of this coast, or elsewhere.”¹³ Although it is very difficult to determine to what extent the Gitga’at in particular participated in the commercial fishing industry while residing at

⁸ DIA, *Annual Report, 1880*, 3.

⁹ M.C. Urquhart and K.A.H. Buckley, *Historical Statistics of Canada*, (Toronto: MacMillan, 1965), 396.

¹⁰ DIA, *Annual Report, 1881*, 147.

¹¹ DIA, *Annual Report, 1889*, Part I, 118.

¹² DIA, *Annual Report, 1889*, xxxi.

¹³ DIA, *Annual Report, 1889*, part I, 118.



Figure 10: North Pacific Cannery. 1940 (Courtesy BCA, C-08022)



Figure 11: Klemtu in 1936 (Courtesy BCA, E-07904)



Figure 12: Cleaning salmon at Inverness Cannery, 1947 (Courtesy BCA, I-28894)



Figure 13: Canning salmon at Inverness Cannery, 1947 (Courtesy BCA, I-28895)

Metlakatla, it is probable that they were active participants and they clearly became familiar with paid work and some features of the new European system.

Working at canneries also changed the way the Gitga'at processed fish for home use. Rather than curing fish at home, the Indian Agent reported in 1881:

Indians from all the tribes within a hundred miles visit [the Skeena River canneries], both with a view of obtaining lucrative occupation, as well as taking their own winter's supply of salmon for home consumption ... the men enter into contracts to supply salmon, and the women and children are handy workers and most useful in the various steps necessary to prepare the fish for market.¹⁴

In addition to making money, Aboriginal People working at canneries also were able to gather food fish for the winter.

Gitga'at participation in the new economy became more evident after their relocation to Hartley Bay in 1887. One of the earliest specific references to Gitga'at participation in the commercial fishing industry is a list of people residing at Hartley Bay in 1888, one year after the community was founded. This list, recorded by Thomas Crosby, includes the name Mr. Holmes, manager of the British-American Cannery located in Port Essington.¹⁵ Although the list does not indicate what role he played in the community, his presence there was likely motivated by financial interests. His presence also suggests that the Gitga'at were familiar with paid work very early on which may account for the cash they had on hand. In 1888, personal donations were made to the Missionary Society and in 1889, \$47.45 was raised to purchase a Church bell. Other funds may also have been collected to help construct a sawmill on Quaal River. At least

¹⁴ DIA, *Annual Report, 1881*, 153.

¹⁵ Campbell, "Hartley Bay, British Columbia," 11.

some of the money held in Hartley Bay at this time probably came from Gitga'at work at canneries or fishing.

As the century drew to a close, a world wide depression reached the northwest coast and revenue from commercial fishing began to fall. In 1894, A.W. Vowell, Indian Superintendent, warned that "The Indians do not now, nor can they expect to in the future, make as much money as formerly in any line of industry or business."¹⁶ To offset reductions in cash income, Aboriginal Peoples invested more energy in gathering traditional foods for home use. In 1895, Indian Agent Charles Todd reported:

small earnings of Indians at white men's industries had the effect of starting them into an extra effort to secure more than usual of dried fish for winter use so that, although the Indians had not the means to purchase the usual quantity of white men's food, there has been no real scarcity, and I distributed less than half the amount of some former years for the support of destitute Indians.¹⁷

Six years later, James Smart, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, confirmed the importance of food fishing: "While they catch and consume the salmon which run during the earlier months of the season, the autumn run is of still greater importance to them, as upon it they depend to lay up for their winter's consumption."¹⁸ By participating both in their traditional economy and the new wage economy, Indians on the northwest coast created a stable and flexible economic strategy. Consequently, few men or women, young or old, required government aid.

Although revenue from commercial fishing did not again reach 1889 levels, Aboriginal fishermen continued to find rewarding work in the commercial fishing industry in the early twentieth century. The fishing industry had already established itself

¹⁶ Canada, *Sessional Papers*, 1895, No. 14 p. 202.

¹⁷ DIA, *Annual Report*, 1895, 165.

¹⁸ DIA, *Annual Report*, 1901, xxv.

as the single largest employer of Aboriginal People in British Columbia and would remain in this position into the 1950s. Still, making money did not replace traditional food gathering practices. Instead, Aboriginal People built paid work into their traditional lifestyles. In 1903, George Morrow, Indian Agent for the North-West Coast Agency, described the Gitga'at as "a good-living, self-supporting people"¹⁹ and in 1910, when Hartley Bay was transferred to the Bella Coola Agency, Agent Iver Fougner reported:

During the summer months, [the Indians of this Agency] are generally employed at the salmon canneries; the men are fishing with small boats and nets, while the women and children are at work inside preparing the fish for canning. The rest of the year they fish for their own consumption in rivers, lakes, or the deep sea. In the fall salmon is caught and cured for winter supply; the fish is split in two, dried in the sun or over their fires. The fish was plentiful during the year and work was easily obtained at the canneries.

Nine years later, the bands in the Bella Coola Agency continued to earn "a great amount of money ... owing to the high price paid for salmon, and the unusually large catch made."²⁰

Discussions between the Gitga'at and the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs, which visited Hartley Bay in September 1913, also emphasized the significance of subsistence fishing to the Gitga'at. The Commission was trying to assign reserves but leaders of the Gitga'at refused to "accept anything from anyone until such time as the ... Indian title is settled."²¹ Three years later, under pressure from the Indian Agent and the local reverend, the Gitga'at finally agreed to cooperate if the Commission would recognize their right to harvest timber on Gil Island, hunt over a large area, and fish in a number of creeks, all of which had been part of their traditional territory "since time

¹⁹ DIA, *Annual Report, 1903*, 297.

²⁰ Iver Fougner, Indian Agent, 28 May 1919.

²¹ Campbell, "Hartley Bay, British Columbia," 22.

immemorial.”²² These were not areas where the Gitga’at could find work, these were places where food, clothing, and shelter could be found.

In addition to asserting their control over their traditional territory, the Gitga’at also determined, to some extent, their involvement in the first years of the twentieth century. From 1907 to 1909, for example, Heber Clifton worked as a “special constable” at Wadhams Cannery on Rivers Inlet at a wage of \$12.50 per month during the cannery season.²³ In addition to maintaining order, he also acted as an “Indian Boss” or middleman between his people and cannery officials. Margaret Reece remembers that Heber, who had a “tent” on the back of his boat, “used to take everybody [to the cannery]. ... He got paid for that and then he’d pick out each woman to work in the cannery and pays them \$5 each to go down there.”²⁴ Around the turn of the century, most people from Hartley Bay worked at Whadam’s Cannery in Rivers Inlet or one of the Skeena River canneries but when the cannery at Klemtu opened in the 1920s[?], most of the Gitga’at took work there because it was closer to home.²⁵

Other opportunities were also available close to home for local entrepreneurs. Around the time of World War I, Charles Robinson opened a clam cannery at Lachljeets, or Clamstown, near an ancient Gitga’at campsite on Fin Island.²⁶ When not fishing, Gitga’at fishermen bolstered their income by building and operating gasoline boats for

²² Campbell, “Hartley Bay, British Columbia,” 23.

²³ Campbell, “Hartley Bay, British Columbia,” 21.

²⁴ Margaret Reece, interview.

²⁵ Merle Reece, interview.

²⁶ Campbell, “Hartley Bay, British Columbia,” 19.

transportation purposes.²⁷ In 1913, Heber Clifton transported two miners from Hartley Bay to Fin Island for a fee of \$10. Later, he carried the same men to Surf Inlet for \$45.²⁸



Figure 14: Label from a can of clams packed at Lachljeets (Courtesy Robert Turner, Personal Collection).

Aboriginal food fisheries, however, were constantly threatened by unfair government regulations and licensing programs that allowed whites to fish in Aboriginal territory. Complaints registered by northwest coast Aboriginal fishermen against these fishermen were first recognized by the DIA in 1878. That year, Indian Superintendent J.W. Powell described an ongoing dispute:

Coast Indians attach as much value and importance to their customary fishing grounds as interior Tribes do to their grazing and agricultural lands, and look with much jealousy upon the approach of white settlers to these places so necessary to their prosperity and existence. On the Northern coast there are certain salmon streams to which for ages their rights have never been questioned, and I have no doubt that extreme care will have to be taken in considering their claims and adjusting their differences if a friendly feeling is to be perpetuated.

²⁷ These boats were used primarily for fishing for home consumption. DIA, *Annual Report, 1913*, 279; DIA, *Annual Report, 1915*, Part II 104.

²⁸ Campbell, "Hartley Bay, British Columbia," 19.

I do not think the difficulties of arranging these matters are by any means insuperable, but I feel quite certain that the hereditary rights to which they are so devotedly attached ought not to be longer left in abeyance.²⁹

Two years later, Powell reported that the dispute ended largely because fish stocks had been unusually abundant in the years since the dispute.³⁰ By 1884, however, Powell reported two more formal complaints against white fishermen stealing traditional fishing sites.³¹

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the hereditary rights that Powell believed “ought not to be longer left in abeyance” were being attacked by unfair employment standards. In 1913, a Kimsuit fisherman named Wilson protested to the McKenna McBride Commission:

Wilson: This is our country, but in spite of that, because I have no right to work in the cannery, I cannot get a boat to fish with, and therefore I can get no money. The Japanese and the white man came here and they have no wives, but they are given work whenever they want it. I have no wife to work in the Cannery and because I have no wife to work inside they will not give me a boat to fish.

Commissioners: Why have you no wife?

Wilson: Because I have no money to keep one with.³²

If possible, canneries hired white, and sometimes Asian, fishermen ahead of Aboriginal People. This preference was most obvious after the two World Wars when returning soldiers were given jobs and licenses previously held by Aboriginal People. In February of 1919, fishermen at Hartley Bay sent a letter to their Indian Agent, Iver Fougner, because they were afraid that traditional fishing spots at Old Town would be taken up by soldiers returning from World War I.³³ In response, Fougner told the fishermen that no

²⁹ DIA, *Annual Report*, 1878, 68.

³⁰ DIA, *Annual Report*, 1880, 117.

³¹ DIA, *Annual Report*, 1881, 153; DIA, *Annual Report*, 1884, lv.

³² BC Archives, (BCA), MS 1056, McKenna McBride Commission, box 1.

³³ Fougner, 11 February 1919

applications had been made for that area and that “the Government will see that the Indians get a chance to fish.”³⁴ But he did not mean they would get the same chance as everyone else. Although the Fishery Department, according to Fougner, would use its “influence in favour of the Indian” if Japanese fishermen were seining on “hereditary ‘Indian’ creeks,” it would be more difficult to ignore the “strong presentations for fishing licenses” being made by returning soldiers.³⁵

Elsewhere on the northwest coast, similar protests were being made both by individuals and by groups. In 1916 after being denied licenses, three Northwest coast Aboriginal fishermen made formal complaints to their Indian Agent. When applying for a seining license for Banks Island, Amos Collison was told by the fishery inspector that the area was “already covered by licenses.” Joshua Sebeshaw (Tsbassa) heard a similar story while Henry Watt was told that independent licenses were only granted to enfranchised Indians or half-breeds not living on a reserve.³⁶ At the same time, entire groups, such as the Kitkatla, complained that fisheries regulations were unfair because Aboriginal fishermen on the northwest coast could only get “attached” gill-net licenses. These licenses cut off fishermen from the open market by forcing them to sell their catches to the cannery providing the license.³⁷ Even if hereditary fishing sites were not being stolen by non-Aboriginal People, it is unlikely Aboriginal fishermen would have been able to get the licenses necessary to catch fish in the rivers and oceans that had been in their territory for thousands of years.

³⁴ Fougner, 22 January 1918

³⁵ Fougner, 7 April 1919.

³⁶ BCA, GR 2043 vol 1655 219, 248

³⁷ BCA GR 2043 vol 1655 626

Another concern for Aboriginal fishermen in the 1920s was cannery closures. Although a number of factors caused these closures, technological change and company mergers were the most important. First, the introduction of gas-powered boats allowed fishermen to travel greater distances so that canneries could be located further apart. Then in the 1930s and 1940s, refrigeration meant that canneries could be further away because fresh fish no longer had to be processed within a day of being caught. As a result, of the more than 100 canneries that existed at the end of World War I, less than 30 remained in 1950.³⁸ Despite these setbacks, Aboriginal People continued to play a prominent role in the fishing industry and profit was steady. In fact, 1929 was a peak year for the industry. That year, 12,675 fishermen were employed by canneries and the DIA estimated that 41 percent of the 27,720 Indians in British Columbia “engage[d] in the several branches of the commercial fishing operations.”³⁹

In the 1930s, however, employment and revenues from commercial fishing fell quickly as Canada faced an international depression. Although Aboriginal Peoples had experienced financial setbacks in 1914, 1924, and 1927, the losses suffered during the Depression were unprecedented and the government did little to help.⁴⁰ While relief payments made to non-Aboriginal Peoples increased dramatically, payments to Aboriginal Peoples remained about the same. Between 1932 and 1936, the federal government spent approximately \$20 per person on Aboriginal People versus \$50 per person for the rest of Canada.⁴¹ The total amount of relief paid out by the DIA decreased annually between 1931 and 1935 while expenditures for non-Aboriginal Canadians rose

³⁸ Lutz, *Makuk*, 274.

³⁹ Department of Fisheries, *Annual Report, 1929-30*, 105.

⁴⁰ John Lutz, *Makuk*, 298.

⁴¹ Hugh Shewell, *‘Enough to Keep them Alive’: Indian Welfare in Canada, 1873-1965* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 123.

over 300 percent⁴² and in 1936, the DIA gave “direct instructions” to Indian Agents that “able-bodied Indians” were not to be given relief.⁴³ The only increase Aboriginal People witnessed was in the amount of relief given to families. Prior to 1934, families were given \$4 regardless of size but beginning in February of that year, families of two or three persons received an additional \$2, families of four to six received an additional \$3, families of seven or eight received an extra \$5, and families of nine or ten persons received \$6 more (\$10 per month).⁴⁴ As had been the case since the first welfare payments were made sixty years earlier, Aboriginal People, despite increasing restrictions, were expected to obtain most of their food from the land and sea.⁴⁵

Mary Johns, a Carrier woman, remembers that in the 1930s, “Our hard life became harder. ... Employment for our men became scarce and finally non-existent. By the end of the Depression the only work available for the men was relief work. ... Many times relief work was the only cash which was circulating on the reserve.” Her experiences were typical. Across the province, profits from the fishing industry, like most paid jobs, plummeted. These losses triggered social troubles that made the problem worse. Helen Clifton recalls that “the depression that set in and the accusing of the wife to the husband ‘you’re not much of a man because we couldn’t keep our children,’” was detrimental to the community. Because government relief efforts were unsuccessful, the Gitga’at, like other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Peoples, could do nothing but wait out

⁴² Shewell, *Enough to Keep them Alive*, 114.

⁴³ Quoted in Lutz, *Makúk*, 317.

⁴⁴ Shewell, *Enough to Keep them Alive*, 124.

⁴⁵ For more information on the history of welfare and Aboriginal People, see Shewell, *Enough to Keep them Alive*; and Liam Haggarty, “‘I’m Going to Call it Spirit Money’: An Ethnohistory of Social Welfare Among the Stó:lō,” MRP, University of Victoria, August 2005.

the hard times. At the end of the 1930s, the economy began to rebound and new opportunities presented themselves during the Second World War.

Helen Clifton believes that “For awhile during the war years, Native people and Native labour, they were treated far better. The housing they had at the canneries, they got the bigger houses, getting the bigger boats, they were treated special, they had better treatment, yeah. ... There was a lot of work and people made enough. It was to get your winter supply of food. Every year, the clothing for your children – there was no welfare. People really worked.”⁴⁶ The departure of soldiers and the internment of British Columbia’s Japanese population produced a shortage of labour, particularly in the fishing industry, and Aboriginal People benefited. Income in the 1940s grew quickly, bettering profits made during any other period since 1900.⁴⁷ After World War II, however, Aboriginal fishermen, like Helen’s husband Johnny Clifton, lost their jobs to non-Aboriginal fishermen and “went back to being the second class citizens they were before the war.”⁴⁸

In the 1950s, jobs were scarce in much of the province. By 1953, even though the total number of fishermen in the province increased, only 91 Aboriginal People found work at canneries on the Fraser River, an area that had employed up to 1200 people per year in the 1890s.⁴⁹ By 1960, the Anglo British Columbia (ABC) Packers Company, variously the second or third largest operator of canneries in British Columbia, employed just over 100 Aboriginal People, a significant drop from 1915 when more than 400 Aboriginal People worked there. Aboriginal People as a percentage of the total

⁴⁶ Helen Clifton interview.

⁴⁷ Lutz, *Makuk*, 297.

⁴⁸ Helen Clifton, interview.

⁴⁹ Lutz, *Makuk*,

workforce also dropped at ABC canneries from close to 50 percent after World War I to less than 20 after World War II.⁵⁰

Part of the reason Aboriginal People lost their jobs was the creation of a new licensing system that distinguished between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal fishermen. Aboriginal fishermen were given an 'I' license and were only allowed to fish in selected areas. If they did not want an 'I' license, they could purchase a non-Aboriginal 'A' license that would allow them to fish in a larger area as they had traditionally done but this license banned them from being full members of the Native Brotherhood and other Aboriginal unions.⁵¹ Helen Clifton remembers the unreasonable decision faced by Aboriginal fishermen:

The Indians just paid ... twenty bucks or something for their license, an 'I' license. 'Oh wow,' as a Native person you felt 'wow, this is great.' But it wasn't. You got screwed! My husband had an 'A' license, you know. It was something because the 'A' license you had some kind of privileges with that to fish up and down this whole coast. So he paid two hundred dollars a year for that ... [but] he wasn't eligible for IFAB [Indian Fisheries Assistance Board] unless he downgraded his license to an Indian license.⁵²

Not being eligible for IFAB was harmful because it was the only way for borrowing money – reserve houses could not be mortgaged. Therefore, to remain competitive, Aboriginal fishermen like Johnny Clifton were forced to accept an "I" license and fish only a fraction of the territory that once belonged to his people.

Other restrictions made these challenges even more daunting. Helen Clifton remembers that, the coast was divided "so you have the northern area, you have the central area, and the southern area, so three type of licenses. So the fishermen had to pay

⁵⁰ Lutz, *Makuk*, 275.

⁵¹ Helen Clifton, interview.

⁵² Helen Clifton, interview.

– if you wanted to fish the northern area, you had to apply for a license for that, if you wanted to fish the whole coast, you had to pay for three licenses.... And they were expensive for a fisherman.... you have to have all these nets, different coloured nets for the Skeena, for the Nass, for spring fishing, for the central area, for down south.”⁵³ As a result, the number and percentage of licences given to Aboriginal People and the number and percentage of fishing boats operated by Aboriginal People fell dramatically. James Robinson attributes part of this decline to cannery owners who made fishermen pay for transportation costs, including fuel and boat rental, that used to be paid by the canneries. He also remembers that increases in the amount of fish imported from Alaska also hurt Aboriginal participation in the commercial fishing industry.⁵⁴ By 1970, Aboriginal People who had once enjoyed unlimited rights to the ocean’s marine life held less than 20 percent of the total number of licenses which provided work for only 1,500 fishermen.⁵⁵

For many Aboriginal People, the food fisheries also was becoming more difficult to access thanks to government restrictions that favoured sportsmen and non-Aboriginal fishermen. In 1955, aboriginal leader Andy Paull lamented in the *Indian Voice* magazine that during economic adversity earlier in the century, “a hungry Indian could go down to the creek and hook a salmon – now they have to watch the salmon swimming by.”⁵⁶ When both the old ways and the new ways became unworkable, Aboriginal People were forced to accept relief from the DIA and other government agencies. By 1946, the DIA

⁵³ Helen Clifton, interview.

⁵⁴ James and Annetta Robinson, interviewed by John Lutz, June 10, 2004.

⁵⁵ Lutz, Makuk.

⁵⁶ Cited in Lutz

had already changed its relief programs to include fresh meat and other sources of protein that Aboriginal People had previously obtained by harvesting traditional foods.⁵⁷

In Hartley Bay and other parts of the northwest coast, the spread of government relief and welfare was delayed. Helen Clifton remembers that in the 1940s and 1950s, her husband fished “just about all year.” In the spring and summer, he trolled for spring, coho, sockeye, and pink salmon, followed by halibut and herring in the fall. Following these fish took him north to the Nass River, as far south as Johnston Strait, and in the fall he caught halibut and other fish off the Queen Charlotte Islands. Women and children also were heavily involved in the commercial fishing industry:

All our people, the women folk worked in the cannery, the kids – as soon as they turned of age – they started working in the cannery. Kids went out fishing with their fathers so they learned the fishing industry. They learned the whole coast. They learned about the tides. ... They learned to run those boats, they learned to set nets, they worked with their fathers.... Good family life too, I guess, learning with their father the whole coast and meeting relatives and meeting all the peoples that we’re related too.⁵⁸

Entire families moved to canneries during the peak season to participate in the fishing industry, leaving villages like Hartley Bay virtually empty.⁵⁹ Not only did this allow families to make as much money as possible, working at the canneries also allowed them to use the factories’ machinery which made canning and smoking their winter supply of fish easier. “Instead of me being at home and trying to can this fish,” Helen Clifton says, “I’d run it through after work is over.”⁶⁰

James and Anetta Robinson remember that fishing was still a profitable occupation through the 1970s. They recall 1964 as the most profitable year and DIA

⁵⁷ Lutz, *Makuk*, ?

⁵⁸ Helen Clifton, interview.

⁵⁹ Campbell, “Hartley Bay, British Columbia,”.

⁶⁰ Helen Clifton, interview.

records support this. The second semi-annual report of 1964 stated that “Few Natives in the Skeena Agency were without employment during the past six months. Those who were not fishing were employed in canneries and the woods.”⁶¹ After 1964, revenue from the commercial fishing industry fell until 1967 when low prices caused a general strike that further reduced earnings.⁶² The industry rebounded with “good years” from 1970 to 1972 but a downward spiral had already begun. As early as the 1950s, Helen remembers that even though catches were strong, “you could hear the desperation in the fishermen now, you could just hear it.”⁶³ After struggling through the 1980s, James Robinson finally sold his fishing license in the early 1990s due to low prices paid for fish and a shortened fishing season. Whereas Johnny Clifton had earlier worked continuously from Sunday morning to Friday night, James was only permitted to fish 24 hours per week and only for three months of the year. He estimates that these restrictions limited him to fishing “six or twelve days of the year” which made the almost \$2000 licensing fee impossible.⁶⁴

More recently, independent fishermen operating out of Hartley Bay, Kitamaat, Gitkxaahla, and Prince Rupert have faced new challenges. As profits from the commercial have decreased in recent years, independent fishermen have become indebted to large corporations that loan them money against their licences. If they are unable to repay these debts, the corporations seize their licence, usually a gillnet licence, to reduce competition. Local fishermen estimate that large corporations have used this tactic to seize approximately 70 percent of the available licenses and create a virtual monopoly

⁶¹ DIA, semi-annual report, 1 October 1964.

⁶² DIA, semi-annual report, 1 October 1967.

⁶³ Helen Clifton, interview.

⁶⁴ James and Anetta Robinson, interviewed by John Lutz, June 2004.

over the industry. Although licences are being seized from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal fishermen, some believe these tactics carry an element of racism because independent fishermen holding Indian licenses are overrepresented among those whose licences have been seized. Regardless, this tactic, rooted in the unfair government policies of the 1940s and 1950s, is making it more difficult for Aboriginal fishermen to make a living as commercial fishermen.⁶⁵

Fortunately, the Gitga'at still have access to food fish and other animals and they continue to share with each other. According to Helen Clifton, the natural environment still provided her people with most of their necessities in the 1940s and James and Anetta Robinson estimate that 50 percent of the village's foods comes from the environment and the other half from stores. "So the diet has changed," Helen says, "but we're lucky people to still like to take the canned fish, the canned deer meat, you know." Due in part to their isolated position on the northwest coast and the strength of their traditional food gathering practices, the Gitga'at were able to delay and, to some extent, avoid becoming welfare dependent.

The Gitga'at also are lucky that they have not forgotten how to share. Like his neighbours, James Robinson is always willing to help others who are in need. "If anybody asks for anything," he says, "if I got it, I give it. That's how we work here." The ethic of sharing in the community was amply demonstrated to the world when the community dramatically rescued and sheltered the 100 crew and passengers from the BC Ferries Queen of the North which sunk in their traditional territories in February 2006.

⁶⁵ George Clifton. Clyde and Fred Ridley, Reynold Grant, Vernon Skog, interviewed by John Lutz and Liam Haggarty, December 2005.

Today, the people of Hartley Bay continue to fish for salmon in their traditional waters, harvest seaweed at Kiel, and catch Halibut in traditional fishing grounds. Although there are no commercial licences for salmon left in the village, in recent years the band has bought four commercial halibut quotas which are leased to band members. The complex process of harvesting roe-on-kelp has also survived and thanks to a band purchased licence, provides employment for six Gitga'at fishermen including crew captain James Robinson. Although roe-on-kelp is harvested mainly for export, most of the fish, animals, berries, and other resources collected by the people of Hartley Bay are taken for home use. The fishing industry also provides work for two full time and 2-3 part-time people through the operation of a salmon hatchery on the reserve. In Eddie Robinson's words, "We are still in the fishing business I guess, only it is not commercial."⁶⁶

Trapping and Hunting

Like fishing, trapping and hunting were important to the Gitga'at before and after Europeans arrived. Prior to contact with non-Aboriginal People, the Gitga'at hunted deer, mountain goats, and moose and trapped mink, martin, otter, fox, and muskrat. The lands around Old Town and, later, Hartley Bay were divided into trapping grounds and given to individual Gitga'at lineages. Although individuals worked these grounds, they remained "under the jurisdiction of the clan and so then if the hereditary chief will assign [the area to an individual], it doesn't mean he turns over the ownership of that to this individual. ... you knew it was still clan territory. It wasn't really yours, as an

⁶⁶ Interviewed by John Lutz, June 2004.

individual.”⁶⁷ Although they also were traded to other Aboriginal groups, furs and meat were harvested mainly for home use during the pre-contact period.

After contact, trade in animal pelts and foodstuffs increased when the HBC arrived and it continued to grow in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. In 1889, Indian Agent Charles Todd reported that in the northwest coast agency, “hunters and trappers ... earn from fifty to two hundred and fifty dollars each by killing fur-bearing animals.”⁶⁸ Two years later he noted that “the high price of furs [and a strong fishing industry] renders their subsistence practically safe at all times.”⁶⁹ During the twentieth century, DIA records suggest that the commercial fishing industry became significantly more important to the people of Hartley Bay than the trapping and hunting industries. In 1904 and 1907, Indian Agent George Morrow, Charles Todd’s replacement, stated that although the Gitga’at reserves “are all good hunting-grounds,” the people of Hartley Bay were “turning their attention more and more to other sources of employment,” primarily in the fishing industry.⁷⁰ Despite an increase in the price of furs in 1910, northwest coast Aboriginal People continued to look for work elsewhere⁷¹ and by the 1920s, the northern interior was the only region in British Columbia where trapping remained the main source of income.⁷²

Increased government regulation of the hunting and trapping industries also suggests that these pursuits became less important economically. In 1912, new government legislation required all traplines to be registered with the province and

⁶⁷Helen Clifton, interview.

⁶⁸ DIA, *Annual Report, 1889*, Part I, 118.

⁶⁹ DIA, *Annual Report, 1891*, 169.

⁷⁰ DIA, *Annual Report, 1904*, 267; DIA, *Annual Report, 1907*, 241.

⁷¹ DIA, *Annual Report, 1910*, 201; DIA, *Annual Report, 1916*, Part II, 103.

⁷² Lutz, *Makuk*, 268.

fourteen years later, mapping requirements made the legislation more restrictive.⁷³ These new laws meant that all Gitga'at traplines had to become the property of individuals rather than the "clan," otherwise hereditary lands could be registered by other Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal People. Helen Clifton recalls that "Johnny's father, Heber, Heber Lewis Clifton, he was [trapping when] ... the government got involved and assigned trapping grounds to the First Nations peoples. All those peoples tried to be smart enough to keep the trapping grounds within the territory." But the new policies made it difficult to transfer land between relatives. In the old days, public announcements were enough for transferring land but once trapping grounds had to be registered, "the white man's way of willing from father to son [became the norm] where in our traditional way, it would be uncle to nephew so it stays in the clan."⁷⁴

Despite these regulations and DIA records, oral testimony from Gitga'at elders suggests that trapping and, to a lesser extent, hunting were important activities in which many community members participated. In the 1930s, Margaret Reece's father and her husband Simon trapped mink every winter near Kiel⁷⁵ and in the 1940s and 1950s, Johnny Clifton trapped whenever he was not fishing.⁷⁶ Around the same time, Pearl Clifton remembers her husband William going trapping with his father near Indian River on a trapline that is still registered to his family⁷⁷ and Merle Reece remembers her dad, uncles, and grandfathers hunting deer, ducks, bear, moose, and mountain goats every winter.⁷⁸ James Robinson continued trapping at Surf Inlet into the 1960s before it

⁷³ Lutz, *Makuk*, 269.

⁷⁴ Helen Clifton, interview.

⁷⁵ Margaret Reece, interview.

⁷⁶ Helen Clifton, interview.

⁷⁷ Pearl Clifton, interviewed by John Lutz and Liam Haggarty, 17 February 2005.

⁷⁸ Merle Reece, interview.

became unprofitable. “There was a few dollars there, you know,” he remembers. “I forgot what year, the last year we trapped. We got everything. We got about thirty-five minks. ... And twenty-five martin.”⁷⁹ As was the case in the fishing industry, the decline in the trapping industry was delayed in Hartley Bay, and other northwest coast villages.

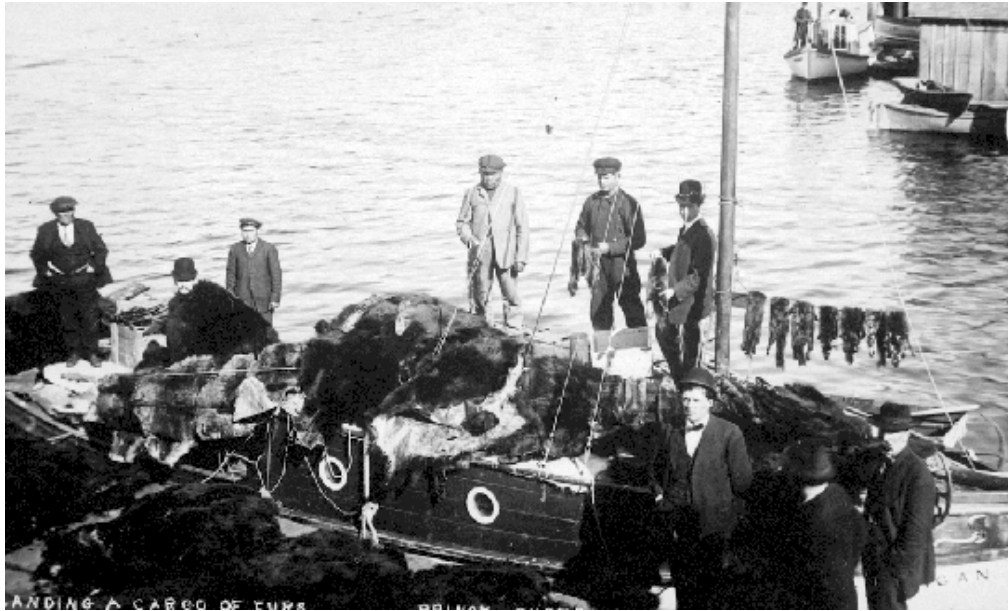


Figure 15: A cargo of furs landing in Prince Rupert ca. 1910 (Courtesy BCA, C-08954)

Elsewhere in the province, few Aboriginal People had been able to keep ownership of their hereditary trapping lines: by 1947, Aboriginal hunters held just 53 percent of registered traplines and nine years later, this number dropped to 10 percent.⁸⁰ As a result, Aboriginal groups could not benefit from the economic boom that happened during World War II.

A decade after the peak years of 1945-46, the real value of furs trapped in British Columbia had fallen by a catastrophic 92 percent. At the same time, hunting expenses

⁷⁹ James and Annetta Robinson, interview.

⁸⁰ Lutz, *Makuk*, 269.

were increasing. In 1870, a hunter could outfit for \$25 but by 1950 this had risen to \$96, about half of which paid for gasoline and kerosene. And to compete with white trappers, hunters need to have an outboard motor which cost \$560 in 1940 but rose substantially by 1950. In 1954, a survey of British Columbia Aboriginal People showed that only 401 people made a living trapping and another 409 trapped occasionally. Aboriginal People and communities who had depended on trapping had to look elsewhere.⁸¹

Eventually, the decline in the trapping and hunting industries spread along the northwest coast to Hartley Bay. Helen Clifton remembers that after her marriage to Johnny, “the trapping industry went kaput” when false furs were introduced. According to Pearl Clifton, the final blow to the industry was the closing of *Scooby’s Fur*, the only fur store in Prince Rupert. “That’s where the people from here, I guess most of the villages would go and sell their fur to him,” she recalls. “After that, everybody quit.”⁸² And when Gitga’at trappers stopped trapping, they lost ownership of their traplines. “If you don’t even get one fur and say ‘well I got this on my trapping ground,’ and sell it, then ... [your trapline will be] sold behind your back.” Bruce Reece, interviewed in 2004, recalls that Lawrence Wilson, the last Gitga’at trapper, gave it up “a few years ago,” and elder Simon Reece, who had even made his own deadfalls to catch marten and mink, gave it up “eight or nine years ago.”⁸³ This loss of traplines resulted in a lack of knowledge and experience among younger people. Even if traplines were available, Helen doubts her people could take advantage of them: “Maybe I could – if Johnny was

⁸¹ Arthur Ray, *Canadian Fur Trade*, 200. The total Aboriginal population in 1954 was approximately 31,000. H.B. Hawthorn et al, *Indians of British Columbia*, p. 23, 101.

⁸² Pearl Clifton, interview.

⁸³ Bruce Reece, interviewed by John Lutz, June 10, 2004.

well he would've been able to go trapping! People [today] don't know how to trap.”⁸⁴

The rapid decline in trapping and hunting forced Aboriginal People, including the Gitga'at, to find work and food in other industries or, if that was not possible, to get relief from community members or the DIA.

Forest Industry

Throughout the nineteenth century, the forest industry depended on Aboriginal labour. More than half of the labour force at the first industrial mill at Port Alberni and the successors in what became Vancouver was composed of Aboriginal People. They worked in logging camps, on board boats and in sawmills which, according to the 1897 Yearbook of British Columbia and the Manual Provincial Information, were “principally worked by Indians, half-breeds, Chinese, and Japs.” By the end of the century, these workers earned between nine and 15 dollars per week which was “about the same wage as white men.”⁸⁵

For the Gitga'at, there is little recorded evidence of them working in the forest industry during the nineteenth century. The first direct reference to logging near Hartley Bay dates to March, 1889, when a sawmill was built to raise money for the local Methodist Church.⁸⁶ In 1899, Indian Agent Charles Todd briefly mentioned the “saw-mill [located] close to the reserve, which sometimes furnishes employment to the Indians”⁸⁷ but it was not nearly as important as fishing, hunting, or trapping. This is partly because the 1890s were not profitable years for forest industry workers. In 1895,

⁸⁴ Helen Clifton, interview.

⁸⁵ Lutz, *Makuk*, 283.

⁸⁶ Campbell, “Hartley Bay, British Columbia,” 12.

⁸⁷ DIA *Annual Report*, 1899, 261.

Todd reported that “the earnings of Indians [in the North-West Coast Agency] usually engaged in the lumber business fell off greatly through the depression in the lumber trade.”⁸⁸ This depression in the forest industry continued to the end of the century as “the value of saw-logs, lumber, freighting and fire-wood, boat-building, & c.” continued to decrease.”⁸⁹

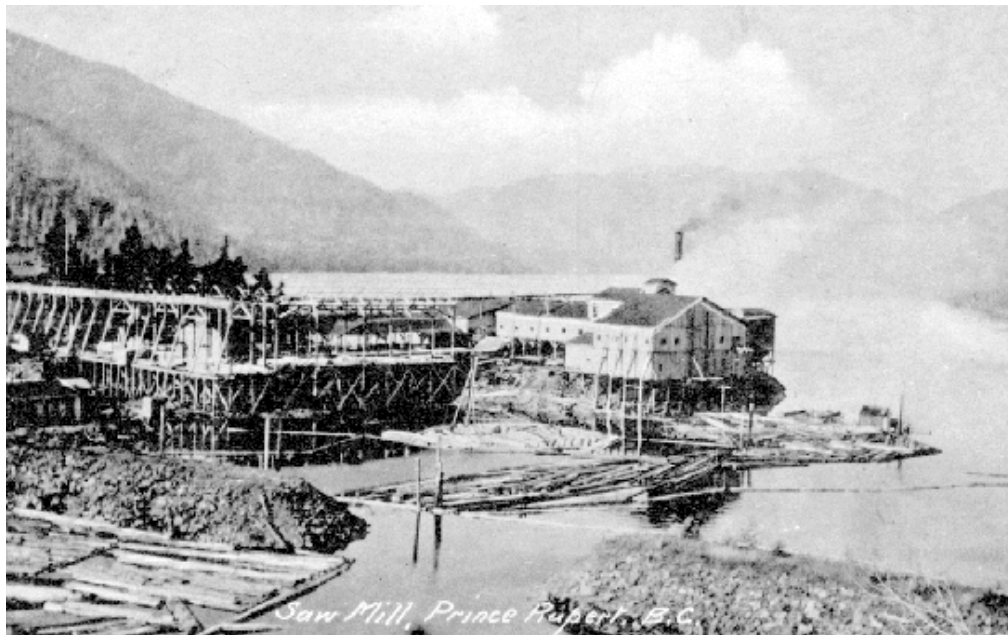


Figure 16: Prince Rupert Sawmill ca. 1910 (Courtesy BCA, A-00488)

In the first decades of the twentieth century after the depression ended, Aboriginal People started to work more in the forest industry. Indian Agent Iver Fougner noted that “Some good timber is scattered over some of [the reserves],”⁹⁰ and the Gitga’at “do

⁸⁸ DIA, *Annual Report*, 1895, 165.

⁸⁹ DIA, *Annual Report*, 1899, 258.

⁹⁰ DIA, *Annual Report*, 1904, 267.

considerable hand-logging in the winter season.”⁹¹ In 1905, Captain Edward McCroskrie opened another sawmill near Hartley Bay, likely replacing the original mill, and the following year he chartered the Hartley Bay Logging, Trading and Fishing Co. Ltd. Unfortunately, we do not know much about the workers or the mill itself which was closed in May 1913.⁹² Although the industry was growing, “it is not an easy matter for the hand-logger to make this class of work profitable, as the best of the timber has all been taken up.”⁹³ By 1910, “Some Indians [could] find employment as hand-loggers for saw-mills and at various kinds of day labour”⁹⁴ but the forest industry never challenged the fishing industry as the most important economic activity for the people of Hartley Bay.

In 1910, government legislation began to limit the number of hand-logging licenses available to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal British Columbians. To offset the loss of jobs that resulted from the enactment of this legislation, Aboriginal People tried to form public logging companies but rarely were they able to get licenses from the provincial government. As Wilson told the McKenna McBride Commission in 1914, “When an Indian wants work at logging he cannot always get a license. In fact we have great difficulty in getting these licenses.” Chief Julian of Sechelt agreed: “A few years ago we used to make our living by logging; that is hand logging, but we had to buy a license to do so but now in these late years we cannot do that. The only thing we do now is to make our living by fishing.”⁹⁵ The same was true in the Bella Coola area where, in 1915, Indian Agent Iver Fougner reported that “The Indians are, perhaps, not in as good a

⁹¹ DIA, *Annual Report, 1906*, 246.

⁹² Campbell, “Hartley Bay, British Columbia,” 18.

⁹³ DIA, *Annual Report, 1907*, 241.

⁹⁴ DIA, *Annual Report, 1910*, 200.

⁹⁵ Lutz, *Makuk*, 284.

financial position as in previous years owing [in part] to the closing of the logging camps.”⁹⁶ In 1922, at least eight Hartley Bay residents, including Heber Clifton, still held hand-logger licenses but it is unknown whether this was an increase or decrease from previous years or whether these licenses were still being used.⁹⁷

After World War I, Aboriginal Peoples devised new strategies for getting around government restrictions. Several Aboriginal groups, including the Gitga’at, sold timber off their reserves to logging companies who promised to hire band members. The DIA supported this system and drew up formal regulations. According to Agent Fougner, if an Aboriginal group wanted to sell timber off a reserve, it must notify the DIA and “a majority of the male members of the band above 21 years of age must consent to relinquish the timber to the Government.” Offers for the trees would be made by private companies and the winning bidder would pay the band the same stumpage fees and royalties charged by the government. Ten percent of the money collected would go directly to the band while the remaining 90 percent would be held for them by the DIA.⁹⁸ Aboriginal People also were allowed to cut reserve timber tax-free for home use if they could get approval from the band council and the DIA.⁹⁹ All this bureaucracy limited Aboriginal Peoples’ success in the forest industry.

In 1928, forestry inspector G.S. Pragnell advised the DIA that Old Town, then used as a seasonal camp, was “a better reserve” than the settlement at Hartley Bay because it contained “good timber.”¹⁰⁰ Several years later, the Gitga’at decided the

⁹⁶ DIA, *Annual Report, 1915*, Part II, 104.

⁹⁷ Forest Branch

⁹⁸ Fougner, 29 April 1919; DIA, RG 10, vol. 7078, file 984/20-7-10-12 pt. 1, J. Hallett to W.E. Collison, 17 December 1934.

⁹⁹ DIA, RG 10, vol. 7863, file 30168-19, Assistant Deputy and Secretary to S.W. Beman, 22 June 1921

¹⁰⁰ DIA, RG 10, vol. 7076, file 984/20-7-5-1 pt. 1, G.S. Pragnell “Inspection Report on Skeena Agency No. 1, 10 October 1928.

timber was good enough to sell on the open market and in 1934 they sent a petition, signed by 29 members, to Indian Agent W.E. Collison requesting that the reserve be logged. “Royalty and stumpage is all we want,” they stated, “not any more than what the Government asks for on all timber sales.”¹⁰¹ A timber license was then issued to J.F. Hallett, formerly of the Pacific Mills Logging Company, to cut 500,000 board feet of spruce, hemlock, and cedar on 275 acres of reserve land, including the west side of Kitkiata Inlet (IR No. 1). In return, Hallett agreed to pay the “same stumpage and royalty as I have to pay the Government for Crown timber.” This amounted to between \$250 and \$1000, half of which would go directly to the Gitga’at with the other half to be kept in trust by the DIA.¹⁰² The trees would be felled by Gitga’at at “ordinary logging rates” and transported by Hallett. DIA officials insisted that no whites would be hired except to transport the timber and that no logs would be removed from the reserves until the Gitga’at had been paid both for the timber and their labour.¹⁰³ However, the agreement “fell through” for unknown reasons.¹⁰⁴

Five years later, another application was presented by the Gitga’at, this time for the construction of a new public hall in Hartley Bay. The DIA allowed 50,000 board feet of spruce and cedar logs to be cut on Finn Island (IR No. 6) and the logs were to be sent to the Pacific Mills Company at Ocean Falls for processing. Rather than billing the band for cash, Pacific Mills agreed to keep half the logs as compensation.¹⁰⁵ For this to work, the DIA approved an additional 50,000 board feet to be cut on Gil Island (IR No. 12).

¹⁰¹ DIA, RG 10, vol. 7078, file 984/20-7-10-12 pt. 1, H.L. Clifton, Sr., et al. to W.E. Collison, 9 November 1934.

¹⁰² DIA, RG 10, vol. 7078, file 984/20-7-10-12 pt. 1, “Application to Purchase Timber,” 17 December 1934; DIA, RG 10, vol. 7078, file 984/20-7-10-12 pt. 1, J. Hallett to W.E. Collison, 17 December 1934.

¹⁰³ DIA, RG 10, vol. 7078, file 984/20-7-10-12 pt. 1, W.E. Collison to the Secretary, 25 January 1935; DIA, RG 10, vol. 7078, file 984/20-7-10-12 pt. 1, A.F. McKenzie to W.E. Collison, 5 February 1935.

¹⁰⁴ DIA, RG 10, vol. 7078, file 984/20-7-10-12 pt. 1, W.E. Collison to the Secretary, 9 March 1939.

¹⁰⁵ DIA, RG 10, vol. 7078, file 984/20-7-10-12 pt. 1, W.E. Collison to the Secretary, 9 March 1939.

Construction on the public hall was set to commence in the fall, as soon as the people of Hartley Bay returned from the canneries.¹⁰⁶

In 1951, the Hartley Bay Band Council voted to cut more reserve timber which was seen to be “over-age.” The council asked the DIA for 533 acres of timber near Old Town (I.R. No. 1, 3, and 3A) and the DIA agreed.¹⁰⁷ Like the agreement reached with Hallet, this proposal failed but was resurrected in 1955. Again, the council passed a motion asking for hundreds of acres of timber which caught the interest of William Jefferies, a Prince Rupert Aboriginal man, who offered \$5.50 per 1000 board feet. However, the DIA hesitated to support the deal and it is unknown whether Jefferies’ offer was accepted.¹⁰⁸

Although the forest industry had become more financially important to the Gitga’at after 1950, it never became as significant as fishing, hunting, or trapping. As Douglas Hudson has argued, this was partly because beginning in 1946, Aboriginal People working in the forest industry became displaced by “outside” workers employed by multinational forestry companies. Over the last fifty years, restrictive government legislation and the emergence of a small number of large corporations hiring from union halls in Vancouver left Aboriginal People out of the forest industry.

In the last fifteen years this has started to change and a few people have turned to the forest industry to make up for setbacks in the fishing industry. Since 2000, new forest agreements with the major forest companies have included provisions to train and hire local men when they work in Gitga’at traditional territory. Bruce Reece thinks that as

¹⁰⁶ DIA, RG 10, vol. 7078, file 984/20-7-10-12 pt. 1, W.E. Collison to the Secretary, 16 June 1939.

¹⁰⁷ DIA, RG 10, vol. 7078, file 984/20-7-10 pt. 1, F. Earl Anfield to W.S. Arnell, 28 November 1951.

¹⁰⁸ DIA, RG 10, vol. 7078, file 984/20-7-10 pt. 1, “Coucil Meeting (Public),” 14 February 1952.

many as 12 men from the village were employed in 2003 and half a dozen in June 2004.¹⁰⁹

Agriculture

Aboriginal People on the northwest coast were food gatherers long before Europeans arrived but coastal geography prevented them from becoming the agriculturalists Europeans wanted them to be. Prior to contact, the Gitga'at harvested salmonberry sprouts, cow parsnip, licorice fern roots, devil's club, salalberries, huckleberries, and various other fruits and vegetables. Most of these agricultural resources were collected in the fall and preserved for the winter months. They were normally prepared alongside more important foods, like fish or game, so less time was spent gathering these items. After contact, little changed. Because Europeans were more interested in fish, furs, and timber, berries and other produce were harvested mainly for home use. The Gitga'at also traveled seasonally to Victoria, the Fraser Valley, and Puget Sound to find paid work on European farms or hop fields. Missionary William Duncan noted in 1857 that around Victoria "most of the Farm Servants employed here by the settlers are Chimsyan (Tsimshian) Indians -- and they all give them a good character."¹¹⁰ In the 1880s, "Large numbers from the Nass, Simpson, Metlakahtla, and other places on the coast, ... [came] to Victoria, to seek employment in the hop-picking grounds of Puget Sound,"¹¹¹ but

¹⁰⁹ Bruce Reece, interviewed by John Lutz, June 10, 2004; Terry Joe Robinson, interviewed by John Lutz, June 10, 2004.

¹¹⁰ William Duncan, "Journal", 11 July 1857, quoted in Jean Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla: A Victorian Missionary in British Columbia* (Ottawa, 1974), 40

¹¹¹ DIA, *Annual Report, 1885*, 119.

“when their expenses to and fro are deducted from their earnings thereat, so little is left them that it were almost better had they remained at home.”¹¹²

Along with the Church and other government agencies, the DIA encouraged agriculture because it believed gardening was a sign of “progress” or “advancement”. As a result, Indian Agents and other government officials were very concerned about the agricultural pursuits on the northwest coast and often talked about the possibility of keeping gardens. Unfortunately for the DIA, “The north-west coast of British Columbia,” said Indian Superintendent J.W. Powell noted in 1878, “is rocky in character, densely wooded, and presents great difficulties to agricultural pursuits”.¹¹³ As a result, “agricultural operations [of Indians in the North-West Coast Agency] are confined to the cultivation of roots, the soil being unsuitable for the growth of grain.”¹¹⁴ Indian Agent Charles Todd agreed with Powell’s conclusions, stating in 1889 that “The land available on the sea coast for agricultural pursuits is extremely limited and the climate wet, so that the Indians seldom try to raise their own potatoes and vegetables, but purchase them from others, and turn their attention more to manufacturing pursuits - boats, canoes and household furniture.”¹¹⁵ In 1893, “The severe winter resulted as elsewhere in heavy losses, arising from the destruction by frost of potatoes and root crops, & c.”¹¹⁶

The success Aboriginal People achieved in other industries, however, meant that “These losses ... entailed no serious privations or suffering.”¹¹⁷ As long as Aboriginal People could find work and food in the fishing, trapping and hunting, and forest

¹¹² DIA, *Annual Report, 1901*, 287.

¹¹³ DIA, *Annual Report, 1878*, 68.

¹¹⁴ DIA, *Annual Report, 1889*, xxxi.

¹¹⁵ DIA, *Annual Report, 1889*, Part I, 118.

¹¹⁶ DIA, *Annual Report, 1893*, 226.

¹¹⁷ DIA, *Annual Report, 1893*, 226.

industries, agricultural losses were manageable. In 1892, “These Indians,” Agent Todd said, “possess such ample resources, independent of agriculture, for supporting themselves in comfort, that it is not probable the latter industry will engage their attention for years to come.”¹¹⁸ Moreover, according to Todd, the Gitga’at and other northwest coast peoples did not like to farm: “These northern Indians are loath to engage in agricultural industries. They will work at anything else in preference to farming. ... Manufacturing, building, lumbering, steamboating or fishing seems to suit them better than tilling the soil or taking care of domestic animals or cattle.”¹¹⁹ “Agricultural pursuits are languishing, especially during this last year [1899], caused by the fact that nearly all the Indians went to the salmon canning business, and hence gardening was neglected, so that their crops of potatoes and other roots were small.”¹²⁰

Eventually, the DIA found modest success when it introduced potatoes to northwest coast communities.¹²¹ At the end of the nineteenth century, Agent Todd stated that “although theirs is not a farming country, there is a steady increase in the quantity of potatoes and other root crops grown by these Indians; the climate and the quality of the land admit of no other agricultural produce, but that named promises to become an important item in their food supply.”¹²² In 1904, George Morrow noted that Hartley Bay residents “All have small gardens, from which they produce potatoes enough for their own use.” But it was impossible to overcome the region’s rugged and harsh

¹¹⁸ DIA, *Annual Report, 1892*, xxi.

¹¹⁹ DIA, *Annual Report, 1894*, 163.

¹²⁰ DIA, *Annual Report, 1899*, 258.

¹²¹ It has been suggested that a native potato growing on the Queen Charlotte Islands was introduced on the northwest coast long before European potatoes but as of yet, there is no evidence to support this suggestion.

¹²² DIA, *Annual Report, 1898*, 245.

environment. “The reserves of these bands are situated in the Coast district, and are not adapted for agriculture.”¹²³

Six years later in 1910, Iver Fougner repeated the same story other Indian Agents had been telling for years. “On some reservations,” he said, “a little land is cleared every year, and potatoes and hay raised besides some fruit such as strawberries and raspberries; both men and women work at this, principally the latter; a few cattle and horses are kept.”¹²⁴ Although potatoes do not seem to have done well in Hartley Bay, Merle Reece remembers her grandmother’s strawberry garden.¹²⁵ Like the other agents, Fougner tried to introduce new vegetables and, to some extent, he was successful. In 1913, he proudly reported that some of the Indians in the Bella Coola Agency “had very fine gardens, raising considerable garden truck such as cabbage, turnips, carrots, & c.”¹²⁶ “I am pleased to report,” he said “that these people are giving more of their attention to the cultivation of the soil, and there is this year a considerable increase in the number of gardens under cultivation, as well as a marked improvement in the condition of the same.”¹²⁷ In 1916, Fougner organized the first agricultural fair at Hartley Bay and prizes were awarded for the three most successful gardens, all of which were potato gardens. That year, James Bates won \$3 for first place, J. Anderson received \$2 for his second place garden, and Heber Clifton was awarded \$1 for third place.¹²⁸

After the fair, Fougner began distributing vegetable seeds to the residents of Hartley Bay. In 1917, he ordered approximately \$5 worth of potatoes and \$2.50 worth of

¹²³ DIA, *Annual Report, 1904*, 267.

¹²⁴ DIA, *Annual Report, 1910*, 241.

¹²⁵ Merle Reece, interview.

¹²⁶ DIA, *Annual Report, 1913*, 279.

¹²⁷ DIA, *Annual Report, 1916*, Part II, 103.

¹²⁸ Fougner, 23 October 1916

garden seeds.¹²⁹ Two years later, the amount of potatoes increased to a value of \$10 and later that year, he ordered 20 packets of Swede turnips (\$1), 30 packets of carrots (\$1.50), and three more sacks of “first class potatoes.”¹³⁰ Unfortunately, this growth was short-lived. High wages at canneries and pulp mills continued to “draw the natives away from the cultivation of the soil” and agriculture was continually “retarded” by work shortages in the fishing and logging industries.¹³¹ In 1920, Hartley Bay was transferred to the Skeena River Agency and Fougner could no longer oversee the area’s agricultural progress. Helen Clifton remembers that in the 1950s and 1960s, virtually all non-traditional agricultural products, including potatoes, were bought at stores rather than grown at home.¹³² Around the same time, Pearl Clifton remembers that her husband William sold “potatoes and everything, and meat” at his store attached their house.¹³³ Hop-picking, as well as other paid work in agriculture, declined until it “ended” in the 1950s. Since then, the Gitga’at, like most coastal groups, have only practiced agriculture for the purposes of home consumption.

Other Occupations

At various times during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Gitga’at have added to the money they made from the fishing, hunting and trapping, and forest industries with other paid work. These jobs were usually piecework, rather than wage-based, and were often temporary. In 1889, Indian Superintendent J.W. Powell reported that “The other employments from which the Indians of the North West Coast derive a revenue are:

¹²⁹ Fougner, 24 February 1917

¹³⁰ Fougner, 22 January 1918; Fougner, 12 March 1918; Fougner, 21 March 1918.

¹³¹ *DIA Annual Report 1916-1917*

¹³² Helen Clifton, interview.

¹³³ Pearl Clifton, interview.

manufacturing native jewellery, canoe, boat, and house building, mining, freighting, ... and as hands on steamboats.”¹³⁴ Seven years later, “blacksmithing, trading, ... making gold and silver ornaments, ... making fish-nets and dress[ing] skins, ... [and weaving] mats, baskets, hats, rugs and knitted articles” were added to the list of “other employments” in which northwest coast peoples were actively engaged.¹³⁵ Also, as early as 1913, “Several of the Indians [at Hartley Bay] own[ed] stores,”¹³⁶ a group that later included James and Annetta Robinson.¹³⁷

Freighting people and goods also was an important “other” occupation during the nineteenth century. Prospectors, traders, hunters, and even government officials depended on Aboriginal People for safe transportation from place to place. In 1895, some business was lost to the new steamer *Caledonia* “which carries in six days as much freight as formerly required the services of two hundred Indians and forty canoes for eighteen days, earning at least \$4,500”¹³⁸ but many labourers continued to use Aboriginal transportation systems. Miners often hired Gitga’at people to take them to gold and silver mining claims on Gribbel Island, at Surf Inlet, and at Drum Lummon¹³⁹ and in 1917, G.W. Deane, manager of the East Coast Logging Company, hired Charles Robinson to “carry his mail, freight, men, etc. between Hartley Bay and Crab River” at a fee of \$19 per trip, with Deane supplying the fuel. The \$95 dollar bill, however, was never paid.¹⁴⁰ Although freighting remained profitable until at least the end of World

¹³⁴ DIA, *Annual Report, 1889*, xxxi.

¹³⁵ DIA, *Annual Report, 1896*, 72.

¹³⁶ DIA, *Annual Report, 1913*, 279.

¹³⁷ James and Annetta Robinson, interview.

¹³⁸ DIA, *Annual Report, 1895*, 165.

¹³⁹ Campbell, “Hartley Bay, British Columbia,” 19.

¹⁴⁰ Fougner, 17 November 1917

War I, it, like the rest of the “other occupations,” was never a primary economic interest for the people of Hartley Bay.

In the 1970s, marine ways were built in the village but they burnt down in 1980 and were not replaced. Later, a sawmill ran for a time on the reserve and from 1973 to 1983 there was a band-run store in the village. In 1983-84 a new breakwater was built to provide a more secure anchorage for the fishing fleet and for visiting tourists.¹⁴¹ More recently, numerous full-time and part-time jobs have become available at Hartley Bay. The band office employs local residents as managers, clerks, secretaries, constables, social workers, home-school coordinators, drug and alcohol counsellors, maintenance workers, and recreation coordinators. The local school, post office, and medical clinic also provide several jobs, as does historical research and other local interest projects. Eco-tourism also has become a recent source of employment. Every year, Hartley Bay welcomes visitors from across the country and from around the world looking for “wilderness” vacations. This burgeoning industry has created seasonal jobs for Aboriginal as guides at exclusive fishing and hunting camps. And with the growing popularity of the Kermode bear, an inhabitant of nearby Princess Royal Island and the shores opposite Hartley Bay, tour-guiding likely will continue to prosper.

Conclusion

The 2003 Labour Market Survey shows the dramatic changes that have taken place in the paid work lives of the Gitga’at. Where as once fishing was the mainstay of the economy, nobody declared fishing as their main employment in 2003. Forestry employed only 4%.

¹⁴¹ *People of the Cane*, 11.

Tourism another 13% in seasonal work. The largest employer was the public sector which was reasonable for 83% of the employment.¹⁴² What the future holds for the Gitga'at and British Columbia's other First Nations depends heavily on their economic opportunities and how they are shaped by treaty or other negotiations with other levels of government.

For thousands of years, traditional practices provided these groups with life's necessities and an adequate surplus to conduct trade with other groups for goods they could not obtain in their own territory. More than an economic system, food gathering and other resource use patterns were loaded with cultural meaning and deeply embedded in their world views. Although they were continually adapting to changing environments and technology, these practices had remained relatively constant for hundreds if not thousands of years. Then, in the late eighteenth century, Europeans arrived in the Pacific Northwest and for the first time the Gitga'at and all other First Nations were exposed to an economic way of life very different from their own.

Initially, the European system did not seriously challenge traditional practices. Food gathering was largely unaffected but more time was spent procuring trade goods to exchange with the new, ambitious trading partners. In this way, Europeans became integrated into the Gitga'at traditional economic cycles as a resource to be exploited at certain periods of the year. Over time, more Europeans arrived in what would become British Columbia and trading continued to increase. Slowly, some Aboriginal People began to adopt certain European practices, including paid labour, and traditional practices subsequently garnered less energy and attention. At the same time, Europeans created

¹⁴² Skeena Native Development Society *2003 Labour Market Census*, 2004
<<http://www.snds.bc.ca/lmc.htm>>.

governments and enacted legislation to help spread their way of life. Combined with the devastating effects of disease, lost lands, alienated natural resources, and the removal of Aboriginal children, it seemed inevitable that this legislation would lead to disaster for most if not all First Nations in the Pacific Northwest.

The lowest point came somewhere in the mid-nineteenth century. After 150 years of colonization, Aboriginal Peoples' access to both food resources and paid work had been severely restricted, causing many to apply for and receive government relief from the Department of Indian Affairs. Social problems, such as alcoholism, substance abuse, and high rates of suicide, became apparent on reserves across the province as unemployment rates and welfare dependency rose dramatically. This was particularly evident on urban reserves and other areas with large non-Aboriginal populations. In more isolated areas like Hartley Bay, the spread and strength of these social ills was less severe. The Gitga'at, for example, continued to find well paid work and procure food well into the 1970s and community members continued to share with one another to ensure that everyone had enough to survive. Although far from idyllic, the situation on the northwest coast was preferable to the one experienced by other First Nations.

In recent years British Columbia's First Nations have generated new economic opportunities on their reserves. As mentioned above, new industries and opportunities in and around Hartley are generating work for Gitga'at people previously displaced by failing resource industries. In some ways, the economy has come full circle. As was the case at the time of contact, Aboriginal People's expert knowledge of the land, plants, animals, and other resources in their traditional territories is in demand. At the same time, groups like the Gitga'at are investing more energy in traditional practices that

survived colonization. Employment records suggest this blending of traditional values and cultural practices with modern technology and wage labour is working. According to the Skeena Native Development Society, the unemployment rate in Hartley Bay has dropped from 73 percent in 1994 to 41 percent in 2003.¹⁴³ With access to the resources in their traditional territory and through this blending of new and old the Gitga'at and other First Nations are likely to recover the economic independence they enjoyed in the past.

¹⁴³ Skeena Native Development Society *2003 Labour Market Census*, 2004. In 1997 the unemployment rate was 46 percent and in 2000 it was 49 percent.